



From the Editor

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Cultivating Open Spaces for Civic Literacy and Advocacy

By way of introduction to this fall 2013 issue, I would like to underscore the importance of the partnerships we develop to advance service-learning and civic engagement. Doing so requires a look at the role of instruction, communication, and civic commitments as related to the mission of higher education. The reflections here are based, in part, from my opening remarks at the 2013 North Carolina Campus Compact Civic Institute.

In the 2011 report, *Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication*, author and one of this issue's contributors, Peter Levine, notes that communication serves a vital civic function—one that brings people together to deliberate and contest how we should live together in ways that deepen democratic forms of life. The research with people who follow, or rather increasingly do not follow the news as evidenced by the rapid decline of newspaper readership, shows that absent an understanding of and discussion of the news, we are left inert, passive, even cynical, and unable to participate effectively in the public sphere (Mindich, 2004). In response, many of us have been on a civic literacy and advocacy mission of sorts, to boost what students know and to teach them how to enter into the conversations of our communities for the purpose of understanding and enacting change.

Levine urges educators to pick up where newspapers and associations of the past left off—to provide the space, tools, and teaching of civic skills to preserve a democracy that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. To do that, a shift in priorities is needed for our colleges and universities. Critical scholar Henry Giroux reminds us that higher education is one of the few remaining public spheres where the central tenets and values of democracy are even spoken of, if not always enough or as deeply as we might like. He says, "It may be the case that everyday life is increasingly organized around market principles; but confusing a market-determined society with democracy hollows out the legacy of higher education, whose deepest roots are moral, not commercial (2012, ¶15).

At a time when many states are advancing education under a program of austerity and slashed budgets, there is a push for educators to turn to online education and virtual forums, to infuse the use of tablets in middle schools, and introduce other high-tech applications into schools to increase "efficiencies." While technology has a vital place in education, we must recognize the growing, not shrinking need for face-to-face time in the classroom and in the community to deliberate and decide together the fate of our future (Block, 2008).

Earlier this year, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory said on a national radio show that funding for higher education should be based on how many students can get jobs. He also called out the fields of gender studies and philosophy as being ones he did not feel should be “subsidized” by public higher education to which many of us cringed. I quote here Brian Rosenberg (2013), President of Macalester College, a private liberal arts school in Minnesota in a story that appeared in the *Huffington Post*:

Governor McCrory's remarks are based on the following unsubstantiated assumptions: that public education has as its sole purpose in a democracy the preparation for a job; that one can predict based upon a student's area of study the employability and career path of that student; that one can know today where the jobs will be in 10 or 20 years; that the skills most necessary for the generation of economic success and strong civil society in the 21st century are only taught in certain fields, which can be identified in advance and therefore appropriately funded by legislators; that the current public investment in an institution like the University of North Carolina is, in its present form, a bad one... Here is what the evidence actually suggests about these assumptions: they are, in order, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, and wrong. On the plus side, they are simple, easy to communicate, and able to get a large number of people riled up.

Communication indeed serves a vital civic function and thus we should teach our students how to interact in ethical and effective ways with community members and each other. We need to support instruction that pushes students to ask questions and challenge their own assumptions, by examining the discourses surrounding our political issues, by critically analyzing the merits of different arguments, and by taking collective action that is just and fair.

But, we need to do more. We need to also work with our community leaders and government officials to make sure that they create, not close off, the open spaces for citizens—including our students—to use their newly acquired skills. All too often, sadly, the new voices of democracy are silenced by larger corporate interests or betrayed by elected and appointed leaders who turn to their own special interest groups and funders to keep alternative views or actions from penetrating their control. In other words, we have to be activists for democracy if students are to reap the benefits of civic instruction and action.

In the South, doing this work—educating students and intervening in community matters—is more important than ever. In the 2013 Millennials Civic Health Index, we learn that 36.5% of our nation’s youth, ages 18-29, live in the South. That is a great opportunity for teachers and scholars in this part of the United States, but it is one not without significant challenges.

Let me explain. George Packer wrote in the *New Yorker* (2013) of our “Southern Discomfort.” He says Southern Congressional leaders are “a captive tool of corporate ideology” as evidenced by their positions on issues that increasingly are alienated from the rest of the American people. This is true in the matters of gun control, marriage and civil unions for people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, on religion, and even the most basic, citizen voting practices.

So what we do in the classroom matters for the future of our students and this country. Our willingness to introduce topics that are admittedly difficult for students to talk about at first blush is critical. In this issue, Julie Shackford-Bradley's article, *Human Rights in Everyday Life:*

Partnering Human Rights and Service-Learning/Engaged Scholarship in Local Communities, emphasizes that discussions of human rights principles and strategies can shed light on ongoing social justice movements in this country and globally. Doing so equips students who previously regarded persistent inequality as a fait accompli, to use a critical framework to examine inequality instead as a product of policy and cultural practices that can be changed. This work is not for the faint of heart.

Alexa Darby, Frances Ward-Johnson, Gabrielle Newman, Margot Haglund, and Tammy Cobb detail the time-consuming and demanding features of partnerships in their article, *Motivation to Collaborate: Applying Motivation Theory to Community Organizations and Universities Working Together*. Though the work is challenging, cultivating resilience and tapping into other motivating factors is necessary for all who hope to seize opportunities to engage in meaningful public work.

The time is right to put our creative energies to work to tap into alternative modes and methods of civic engagement to penetrate the boundaries where they exist and to puncture the bubbles of control when they prevent us from directly tackling injustice. Our invited articles speak directly to that mandate. Building on the 2013 North Carolina Campus Compact's 2013 Civic Institute theme, *Becoming Citizens, Becoming Community*, the articles here by Peter Levine, Judith Ramaley, and William Muse address the practical, philosophical, and experiential challenges of our democracy. Collectively, these articles provide some insights to answering the question, "What can we do better to invigorate the civic commitments and interests of our students to engage with the political, economic, social, and cultural questions before us now?"

If we can effectively teach and learn with our youth how to constructively engage with the issues of our time, we can tip the scales of justice toward equality not inequity and toward compassion for rather than fear from one another in our communities.

Finally, I am happy to announce some exciting developments that will be of interest to all our readers and contributors:

- We are completing contractual arrangements now so that *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement* will soon be found on EBSCO host databases.
- With this issue we are announcing a Special Issue to be published in 2015 with Guest Editors Brandon W. Kliever at Florida Gulf Coast University and Judith Ramaley, President Emerita, Portland State University and Winona State University. Please read the complete call for submissions with abstract and full paper deadlines for *Spaces of participation and democratic engagement: The public life of higher education reconsidered*. We look forward to your interest, questions, and submissions

Spoma Jovanovic
Editor

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